
A Wobbly Bridge: Strategic Interests and Objectives in *Force 2030*

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Clear definition of enduring strategic interests and objectives is fundamental to setting clear capability priorities, which is the key purpose of a Defence White Paper. *Force 2030* recognises this, and offers the outline of a rigorous hierarchy of interests and objectives, modelled on the approach developed in *Defence 2000*. But the details raise perplexing questions about the nature of Australia's strategic engagement in our immediate neighbourhood, our strategic relationship with Indonesia, our role in Northeast Asia, and about which objectives really drive our force priorities. These failings seriously undermine the new White Paper's policy argument.

Most Defence White Papers start with an essay on the future strategic environment and end with a shopping list of capabilities. The test of a *successful* white paper is what comes in between. There needs to be a bridge between the essay and the shopping list—an argument to establish that the capabilities on the shopping list really provide the most cost-effective way to manage the risks inherent in the strategic environment that the essay has described.¹ The Rudd Government's new Defence White Paper, *Force 2030*, has taken this part of its task seriously. It goes to some trouble to build a policy argument linking strategic risks with capability priorities.

Like the last White Paper, *Defence 2000*, *Force 2030* begins with an expansive concept of strategic risk. It affirms that the ultimate rationale of defence policy is to secure the country itself from direct attack,² but pays careful attention to a broader range of strategic risks which goes beyond direct threats to the continent, and includes international developments which would make such direct threats more probable or more serious. The argument it builds to connect these strategic risks to capability priorities draws heavily on a set of ideas developed in the 1990's and applied in *Defence 2000*. At the core of that approach are concepts of *strategic interests* and *strategic objectives*, which establish the connection between strategic risks and capability priorities.³ The success of *Force 2030*'s policy

¹ For a fuller account of the purposes of Defence White Papers in general, and of the 2009 White Paper in particular, see Hugh White, *The new Defence White Paper: why we need it and what it needs to do* (Sydney: Lowy Institute for International Policy, 2008).

² Department of Defence, *Defending Australia in the Asia-Pacific Century: Force 2030* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2009), para. 5.4.

³ For a fuller description of the concepts of strategic interest sketched here and its place in recent Australian defence planning, see Hugh White, 'Strategic Interests in Australian Defence Policy: Some Historical and Methodological Reflections', *Security Challenges*, vol. 4, no. 2 (Winter 2008), pp. 63-79.

argument therefore depends crucially on how well strategic interests and objectives are identified and defined. That is the focus of this article.

‘Strategic interests’, in the words of *Force 2030*,

are those national security interests that concern the structure and features of the international order that ensure our security from armed attack—and in relation to which Australia might contemplate the use of force.⁴

As *Force 2030* goes on to point out, this is narrower than the concept of ‘national security’ interests,⁵ and so it should be: the aim here is to capture that set of wider interests which should drive decisions about the kind of defence force we need to build, which is properly much narrower than the wider concepts of national interests which inform other policy choices.

Strategic interests conceived in this way provide the basis for determining capability priorities because they provide the basis for deciding strategic objectives, which are the things we want to be able to do with armed force to protect those interests. These then provide the basis for identifying the kinds of operations that could most cost-effectively attain those strategic objectives, which in turn provide the basis for identifying the capabilities that could most cost-effectively perform those operations. To make this process work, the way we identify and describe strategic interests must meet some tough tests. The strategic interests we identify must be genuinely enduring, because the decisions which will be based on them have thirty- or forty-year timeframes. They must be defined clearly and specifically enough to inform the subsequent decisions about objectives, operational options and capability priorities. And they need to be compellingly prioritised to support the inevitable process of selection required to balance cost and risk.

To understand *Force 2030*’s account of Australian strategic interests, it is helpful to look back at the development of the ideas which it seeks to apply. Those ideas emerged in the 1990s, when it became clear to defence policymakers that the narrow concept of Australia’s strategic risks and interests developed in the 1970s and 1980s would need to be broadened in response to the end of the Cold War and the rise of China. For several decades after Vietnam, it had seemed most unlikely that Australia would wish or need to use force except to defend the continent against direct attack. But over the 1990s it became clearer that both the chronic instability of Australia’s nearer neighbours and longer-term uncertainties about Asia’s order required a wider view of Australian strategic interests and objectives. Building on a first attempt in 1997,⁶ the *Defence 2000* White Paper developed such a view. It set out what has become known as the

⁴ Department of Defence, *Force 2030*, para. 5.2.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Department of Defence, *Australia’s Strategic Policy* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 1997).

'concentric circles' model—a hierarchy of five interests and associated objectives, prioritised geographically from the defence of the continent at the centre to support for a stable global system at the periphery.⁷ This construct was challenged after the terrorist attacks of 9/11 in 2001: Robert Hill, then Defence Minister, said in July 2002 that he was unsure that it had ever made sense to define Australia's strategic interests in terms of a series of concentric circles.⁸ However, the Howard Government maintained the *Defence 2000* construct,⁹ even if some capability decisions in 2003 honoured it more in the breach than the observance.

Force 2030 too maintains the 'concentric circles' model of *Defence 2000*, but there are important differences in the way the model is applied. Some of these differences have significant policy implications, which are generally not explored or explained, so it is often hard to know exactly why they have been made. Moreover, *Force 2030* is not a precisely-drafted document, and many key issues are addressed in different—sometimes contradictory—ways in different passages. In particular, there is a lot of imprecision about how the interests defined in Chapter 5 relate to the policy precepts enunciated in Chapter 6, and the objectives (called 'tasks' in *Force 2030*)¹⁰ defined in Chapter 7. That makes it harder to know how far differences in the treatment of strategic interests and objectives between this White Paper and the last one reflect substantive policy shifts, quirks of expression or even simple muddles. Also, while *Force 2030* draws heavily on *Defence 2000*, it reaches back further to echo some ideas from the 1987 White Paper, *The Defence of Australia*,¹¹ as well. Some of the idiosyncrasies of *Force 2030* can be traced to the problems of melding elements of these two rather different policy constructs into a single argument.

The following sections will explore some of these issues under the four headings describing Australia's strategic interests in Chapter 5 of *Force 2030*.

⁷ Department of Defence, *Defence 2000: Our Future Defence Force* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2000), Chapter 4.

⁸ Robert Hill, 'Beyond the White Paper: Strategic Directions for Defence', Address to the Defence and Strategic Studies Course, Australian Defence College, Canberra, 18 June 2002, <<http://www.minister.defence.gov.au/2002/180602.doc>> [Accessed 1 July 2009].

⁹ See for example: Department of Defence, *Defence Update 2007* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2007).

¹⁰ Unfortunately the drafters of *Force 2030* have followed their predecessors in *Defence 2000* by using the word 'tasks' to cover what should be called 'strategic objectives'. 'Objective' is more appropriate in the contexts that concern us here, whereas 'task' should be reserved for the operational level.

¹¹ Department of Defence, *The Defence of Australia* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 1987).

A Secure Australia

In Chapter 5, under the heading of “A Secure Australia”, *Force 2030* describes “the defence of Australia against direct armed attack” as “our most basic strategic interest”.¹² In Chapter 6 this judgement translates into a decision that

Australia’s defence policy should be founded on the principle of self-reliance in the direct defence of Australia and in relation to our unique strategic interests...¹³

In Chapter 7 this principle then translates into the identification of “Deterring and Defeating Attacks on Australia” as “the principal task” for the Australian Defence Force (ADF).¹⁴

This affirmation that the direct defence of the continent is Australia’s most important strategic interest is sound and significant, especially in view of the contrary views expressed from time to time in the defence debates of the past few years.¹⁵ But there are real uncertainties about what that implies for the way capability priorities are defined, in three respects. First, there is a question of scope. When this idea appears in Chapter 6, in the sentence quoted above, a new concept is added to the defence of Australia: “our unique strategic interests”. *Force 2030* does not define what our unique interests are. The context clearly suggests they go beyond the direct defence of the continent, most obviously to include denial of bases to a potential adversary in the immediate neighbourhood.¹⁶ But other passages seem to suggest that the defence of the immediate neighbourhood, though important, is a lower priority than the defence of the continent itself. So does the direct defence of the continent alone take highest priority in force planning, or does it include defence of the immediate neighbourhood as well? These are critical uncertainties—especially in the light of how Australia’s interests are defined in relation to the immediate neighbourhood.

Second, and more broadly, *Force 2030* is ambiguous about the extent to which this highest-priority interest (however defined) and its associated objective *alone* determine force priorities, or whether other, lower-priority, interests and objectives also shape decisions, albeit with less weight. This is a question on which *Defence 2000* was also not as clear as it should have been. Its policy argument clearly implied that all interests and objectives shaped force planning, in accordance with their relative weight, but it

¹² Department of Defence, *Force 2030*, para 5.4.

¹³ *Ibid.*, para. 6.16.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, para 7.2.

¹⁵ See for example Michael Evans, *The Tyranny of Dissonance: Australia’s Strategic Culture and Way of War 1901-2005*, Land Warfare Studies Centre Study Paper, no. 306 (Canberra: Land Warfare Studies Centre, 2005).

¹⁶ This is suggested for example in Department of Defence, *Force 2030*, para. 6.19—although an evident misprint makes this passage especially hard to follow.

retained some passages that still echoed the 1987 *Defence of Australia* White Paper in assigning sole priority to the defence of the continent itself. *Force 2030* perpetuates and even amplifies this muddle. In many passages it seems to revert back to the idea that only the defence of the continent should count in shaping force priorities,¹⁷ in others it acknowledges the need to take wider view.¹⁸ Overall the impression left with this reader at least is that on this critical issue, *Force 2030* goes backwards, being closer in spirit to the 1987 *Defence of Australia* White Paper than to *Defence 2000*.¹⁹

Third, there is a major and highly consequential confusion about whether Australia's strategic objective should be to defend the continent independently against the forces of a major Asian power, or only against the kinds of forces that Indonesia could bring to bear against us. This point is touched on in other articles in this edition, so I will not address it further here. Suffice to say that settling such questions is critical to the transition from identifying an interest to setting an objective. Until we are clear what we aim to be able to do by ourselves, and against whom, force planning will remain a muddle.

A Secure Immediate Neighbourhood

The second strategic interest identified in *Force 2030* is "a secure immediate neighbourhood".²⁰ This is very similar to the second interest identified in *Defence 2000*, but nonetheless raises some important questions. The first relates to internal security. Like *Defence 2000*,²¹ *Force 2030* identifies internal stability as a strategic interest not only in the small island states, but also in Indonesia. This was clearly an error in 2000. While it was credible for Australia to contemplate the use of armed force to support internal stability in countries like East Timor and even Papua New Guinea, it was not credible in a country the size of Indonesia. Conflating our interests in Indonesia with those in the small neighbours obscures this critical difference. *Force 2030* goes even deeper into this error than *Defence 2000*, making the rather remarkable statement that "It is in Australia's vital strategic interests to see a stable and cohesive Indonesia".²² Taken in the context of the definition of 'strategic interest' provided in *Force 2030*, the direct implication of this statement is that Australia would contemplate the use of force to support internal stability in Indonesia. This seems an unsustainable

¹⁷ For example, *Ibid.*, para. 6.29.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, para. 8.9-8.14.

¹⁹ For arguments as to why this is the wrong direction to go, see Hugh White, *Beyond the Defence of Australia: finding a new balance in Australia's defence policy* (Sydney: Lowy Institute for International Policy, 2006); and 'Four Decades of the Defence of Australia: Reflections on Australian Defence Policy over the Past 40 Years', in Ron Huisken and Meredith Thatcher (eds.), *History as Policy: Framing the Debate on the Future of Australia's Defence Policy* (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2007), pp. 163-187.

²⁰ Department of Defence, *Force 2030*, p. 42.

²¹ Department of Defence, *Defence 2000*, para. 4.8-4.9.

²² Department of Defence, *Force 2030*, para. 5.10.

proposition under almost any circumstances. Certainly the White Paper fails to follow through with proposals for forces that could make it credible. And—a separate question, but still significant—how must the Indonesians take it?

Another problem with treating Indonesia under the same heading as our small neighbours is the difference in our response should they come under external attack. In the immediate neighbourhood—excluding Indonesia—Australia has a strategic interest in being able to exclude potentially hostile powers, including major Asian powers, alone if necessary.²³ In maritime Southeast Asia, including Indonesia, Australia's strategic objectives are arguably more limited—to being able to provide substantial support to local coalition partners, and perhaps to leading such a coalition.

Force 2030 provides no such clear-cut distinction, which leaves quite ambiguous what exactly Australia's strategic objectives should be in such a situation, and thus what the ADF needs to be able to do. This problem is confounded by the fact that in defining strategic objectives for the ADF in Chapter 7, *Force 2030* omits to mention the denial of access to bases among our small neighbours to potentially-hostile powers.²⁴ This may be simply an oversight, because denial is central to the definition of strategic interests in the immediate neighbourhood,²⁵ and is clearly referred to elsewhere as a priority. But the failure to translate this central interest into a clear objective is nonetheless perplexing—and surely wrong as a point of policy. Moreover, in omitting denial of the immediate neighbourhood as a strategic objective, *Force 2030* also drops one of the most important policy innovations of *Defence 2000*: a strongly-worded unilateral undertaking by Australia to help defend any of our small island neighbours facing conventional military attack.²⁶ It is hard to know whether this omission was deliberate or an oversight: arguably it was a mistake either way.

The way to resolve this problem is to treat our strategic interests in Indonesia under a separate heading from the small states of our immediate neighbourhood. In the small states of the immediate neighbourhood, Australia has a strategic interest in internal stability, and a virtually automatic commitment to support them alone if necessary from attack by a major power. In regards to Indonesia, while internal stability is clearly very important to us, it is not a *strategic* interest, and the level of support we might provide if it faced external attack, while still substantial, is more conditional.

Finally, *Force 2030* introduces a new element in Australia's strategic interests in relation to Indonesia. In the section headed "A Secure Immediate Neighbourhood" it says that

²³ Department of Defence, *Defence 2000*, para. 6.11-6.13, which pointedly do not include the limitation in relation to wider interests contained in para 6.20.

²⁴ Department of Defence, *Force 2030*, para. 7.10-7.12.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, para. 5.7.

²⁶ Department of Defence, *Defence 2000*, para. 5.51 and 5.54.

Australia has an enduring strategic interest in preventing or mitigating any attempt by nearby states to develop the capacity to undertake sustained military operations within our approaches.²⁷

It is not clear that this is either true, or that it is a credible basis for Australian policy. Clearly Australia has, as *Force 2030* says under the first interest (“A Secure Australia”), “a fundamental interest in controlling the air and sea approaches to our continent”.²⁸ But this is not the same as saying that we have an enduring interest in preventing Indonesia from acquiring the kinds of capabilities that could operate in those approaches. Such capabilities would after all be the very ones that could also operate in Indonesia’s Northern approaches, and help protect both Indonesia and Australia from the major-power intrusions that it is in our enduring interests to prevent. Framing Australia’s interest in this way therefore overlooks the inescapable and deeply significant ambivalence that permeates all aspects of the Australia-Indonesia strategic nexus. Depending on the circumstances, Indonesia could be either a major threat, or an immense strategic asset. At some time in the future, an alliance with a strong Indonesia might be the key to our security, and *Force 2030* itself says that “assisting our Southeast Asian partners to meet external challenges”²⁹ is one priority task for the ADF. This means we can never simply say that Indonesian military weakness is an enduring Australian interest. Moreover, it is hard to see how a policy based on this interest could work. What would we do to “prevent” Indonesia from acquiring military capabilities that would be perfectly legitimate to seek for its own security? And what implications would such a policy have for our bilateral relationship with Jakarta, and for the prospect of close strategic cooperation which *Force 2030* itself advocates?³⁰

Strategic Stability in the Asia-Pacific Region

Force 2030 differs from *Defence 2000* in lumping Australia’s strategic interests in Asia beyond Indonesia under a single heading, thus cutting the number of ‘concentric circles’ in Australia’s hierarchy of interests and objectives from five to four.³¹ *Defence 2000* separated Australian interests in maritime Southeast Asia from those further afield in Asia, on the grounds that closer to home our interests are stronger and the corresponding objectives more demanding. In particular, it judged that Australia might contemplate supporting a coalition in maritime Southeast Asia to resist external aggression even if the United States did not, whereas we would not contemplate joining coalitions in major conflicts elsewhere in Asia other than in support of the United States.³² *Force 2030* loses this important

²⁷ Department of Defence, *Force 2030*, para. 5.8.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, para. 5.5.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, para. 7.13.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, para. 11.21.

³¹ *Ibid.*, para. 5.7-5.16.

³² Department of Defence *Defence 2000*, para. 6.21.

distinction. It is not clear why this has been done, but it is striking that in doing so it revives something of the spirit of the 1987 *Defence of Australia* White Paper,³³ which made a sharp binary distinction between interests within an “Area of Primary Strategic Interest”, and those outside it. We can see a resemblance between the “immediate neighbourhood” as defined in paragraph 5.7 of *Force 2030* and the “Area of Primary Strategic Interest” that featured prominently in 1987. The same idea reappears in another guise in Chapter 6 of *Force 2030*, where a region stretching from the equator to Antarctica and from the Eastern Indian Ocean to Polynesia is defined as the ADF’s “Primary Operational Environment”.³⁴ It is possible that here again we see the hold that the 1987 White Paper seems to have exerted over the drafters of *Force 2030*.

Finally under this heading we should note the clear suggestion, reflecting views expressed by the Prime Minister in 2008,³⁵ that our strategic interests and objectives in Asia include the protection of shipping lanes against attack by major Asian powers.³⁶ This is a very significant proposition, because the military protection of Australian sea-borne trade against attacks by major or even middle powers would be immensely difficult and demanding, requiring forces quite unlike anything we now plan. As a strategic objective this is simply not credible.

A Stable, Rules-based Global Order

Force 2030 strongly affirms the low priority that *Defence 2000* gave to strategic interests beyond the Asian region as a driver of capability development.³⁷ This is important in view of the arguments made by many in the years since 2000 that global commitments to support the United States should take first place in setting Australian strategic priorities. Perhaps in reaction to this debate, *Force 2030* if anything goes somewhat further than *Defence 2000*, and at times reads as if it is determined to present a distinctly different view of Australia’s alliance support for the United States at the global level from John Howard’s.³⁸ It will be interesting to see whether this is more than mere political posturing. Certainly the new Labor Government will not be following Robert Hill’s ideas by elevating support for the United States at the global level to the top of our strategic priorities. But—the aberration of Iraq notwithstanding—neither did John Howard. Nothing we have seen of the actual policy decisions made by the Rudd Government so far suggests that it will deviate much from the longstanding bipartisan approach to supporting the United States beyond the Asia-Pacific, which has shaped Australia’s responses to calls from the White House for three decades now.

³³ Department of Defence, *The Defence of Australia*, para. 2.2.

³⁴ Department of Defence, *Force 2030*, para. 6.38.

³⁵ Kevin Rudd, Address to the RSL National Congress, Townsville, 9 September 2008.

³⁶ Department of Defence, *Force 2030*, para. 5.12, 7.14 and 7.18.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, para. 5.17-5.21.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, para. 6.15.

Conclusion

Force 2030 recognises that defining strategic interests and objectives in a clear and coherent way is an essential step in any rigorous process to setting capability priorities. But it fails to provide such clear and coherent definition, because the account it provides is undermined both by conceptual muddles and by substantive strategic misjudgements. Of course this does not matter very much if the White Paper is just going through the motions to justify the present force and existing plans for the future Balanced Force. But it matters a great deal if, on the threshold of major strategic changes, the White Paper sets out fundamentally to reconsider the kinds of armed forces we should have. Perhaps in the end, the reason *Force 2030* failed to provide an effective account of strategic interests and objectives is that it never quite worked out which of these it was trying to do.

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